



Maryland Saltwater Sportfishermen's Association

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To: House Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

From: William T. Windley Jr.

Re: Testimony on the Reauthorization of the Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act

Date: March 18, 2004

I. INTRODUCTION

Thank you Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the committee for the opportunity to testify before you today regarding H.R. 3883, a bill to reauthorize the Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act. My name is Bill Windley. I am a citizen of Maryland for many years and am serving my fourth term as President of the Maryland Saltwater Sportfishermen's Association (MSSA). The MSSA is by far the largest organization of its type in Maryland. We proudly represent over seven thousand conservation minded anglers from Ocean City to the Frederick and into Pennsylvania as well. The MSSA is "working to provide a unified voice to preserve and protect the rights, traditions and the future of recreational fishing".

II. TESTIMONY

In Maryland, conservation means many things, but first and foremost to most anglers it means striped bass. Commercial and recreational fishermen alike sacrificed greatly during the moratorium, but we were convinced that serious management measurements were necessary then as they are necessary today. My fellow fishermen and I wish to thank this committee for their invaluable and courageous part in the successful recovery of striped bass everywhere. As Marylanders we wish to thank you for the immeasurable affect that the increases in striped bass populations have had on both our economy and our quality of life. You saw the need to protect the shrinking populations of striped in the past. Today we are here to ask you to reauthorize and fund the Act that turned their population around, because specific focus on striped bass is just as important today as it was twenty years ago.

The concern about striped bass today is not their numbers. The concern is that the health of the population is being undermined by a reduced ability of the marine and estuarine environment to support their numbers. The most obvious manifestation of this concern is an emerging disease that threatens to have dire consequences for the health of striped bass populations. A type of mycobacteria that according to researchers has never before been reported in wild fish on the East Coast is infecting striped bass and spreading rapidly through the population. This disease causes external ulcers and internal lesions. Studies have found that in hatchery-raised fish this disease is 100% fatal, but the ultimate impact on wild populations is so far not known.

Striped bass infected with the disease are generally found to be in extremely poor physical condition. The state of their condition is felt by many to be related to poor nutrition and poor water quality. The presence of this disease may indicate that degraded habitat and environmental conditions or poor nutrition is contributing to the problem. Some feel that fish weakened by these conditions may be more susceptible to the infections. Recent estimates have found that up to 70% of fish in some areas of the Chesapeake are infected.

According to a report prepared by the United States Geological Survey, Leetown Science Center, research into this disease needs to move forward. Specifically, the report points to: 1) the lack of information on age specific mortality associated with the disease and, 2) the unknown effects on reproductive biology and spawning success makes estimates of population impacts currently impossible.

In plain English, this means that: 1) We don't we do not have a clear picture of mortality at age so we cannot know if the disease impacts different ages at different rates. As an example, do younger fish succumb more readily than older fish, or do fish not live as long as should normally be expected. 2) We don't know the mortality rates on prime spawners, so we cannot predict propagation. If the disease impacts the ability of stripers to spawn to their full potential, we cannot predict the extent to which disease is reducing the spawning potential of the population (could be fewer eggs/sperm or lower quality eggs/sperm because of the disease).

Striped bass are highly prized by the recreational community for both sport and food. There is a direct correlation between the health of striped bass and the health of fishing community economies both in the Chesapeake region and the east coast from North Carolina to Maine.

The recreational fishing community of the east coast appeals to this committee today to reauthorize the Act as a continued vehicle for special focus on striped bass and to authorize additional funding to the various state and federal agencies, and universities active in investigating habitat, forage base and disease problems so that solutions can be found.

Sincerely submitted,

William T. Windley Jr